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E.P.A. to Issue Air Rules to Protect Park Vistas

By KATHARINE Q. SEELYE

WASHINGTON, June 21 — The Bush administration is preparing to issue rules on Friday to clamp down on old coal-fired power plants that are the chief culprits in the haze that has spoiled the vistas in many national parks and wilderness areas, leaving the worst blight in Acadia National Park in Maine and the Great Smoky Mountains National Park in Tennessee.

A spokesman said today that on Friday, Christie Whitman, administrator of the Environmental Protection Agency, would issue the proposed rules written almost exactly as the Clinton administration wrote but did not enact before President Bill Clinton left office in January. The rules will be published in the Federal Register, beginning a 60-day period for public comment before they are adopted in the fall.

Mrs. Whitman said three weeks ago that she would not oppose the Clinton rules. "Part of the president's commitment to protecting national parks includes protecting the views that draw us to these parks year after year," she said then. "But over the years, haze and pollution have eroded these vistas."

But the White House wanted to review how the rules would affect the nation's energy supplies, and many environmental groups worried that this would give the administration a chance to weaken them.

An administration official said today that the Environmental Protection Agency had determined that the effect of the rules on the nation's energy supply, energy prices and reliance on foreign supplies would be insignificant, a conclusion that the utilities are almost certain to challenge as they face hundreds of millions of dollars in expenses to cut their emissions.

Environmental groups hailed the proposed rules today as a major step toward helping to improve visibility in the national parks, although they reserved final judgment until the rules are adopted.

"If they want to do the right thing, they still can," said John Stanton, an air-quality specialist in the Clinton administration and now vice president for air programs at the National Environmental Trust. "But if they want to gut the rule, they still can."

The rules come at a time when national polls show the public is increasingly concerned over Mr. Bush's commitment to the environment because of what the public sees as his ties to the oil and gas industries and his rejection of the Kyoto

agreement, an international treaty on global warming. The most recent New York Times/CBS News poll showed that 46 percent of people disapprove of President Bush's handling of the environment, while 39 percent approve. Environmentalists argue that Mr. Bush essentially had no choice but to adopt the Clinton rules, in part because the national parks are too popular with the public to risk neglecting. They also note that while air quality in some parts of the country has been improving, parks including Shenandoah in Virginia, the Great Smoky Mountains in North Carolina and Tennessee, and Acadia in Maine have had deteriorating air quality. Acadia has recorded worse smog than Boston or Philadelphia.

Congress determined in an amendment to the Clean Air Act in 1977 that the national parks deserved special protection. The rules call for improving visibility in the parks by 15 percent per decade for the next six decades and achieving a "pristine" level of air quality by 2064.

The rules cover 26 sources of pollution, including power plants, municipal waste incinerators, copper smelters and pulp mills, but the agency has identified power plants as the biggest source of the problem.

The rules cover power plants that were built from 1962 to 1977 and emit more than 250 tons of pollutants like sulfur dioxide and nitrogen oxide every year. The Edison Electric Institute, which represents the utilities, estimates that 580 units (there may be more than one unit at a power plant) will have to be upgraded. Any plant that meets the other criteria and can be identified as contributing to any pollution that limits visibility in any national park is covered by the rules. Because of meteorologic patterns, the offending plants are all over the country, not just near national parks. Pollution particles can travel as far as 1,000 miles. For example, at Acadia National Park, the view of Penobscot Bay is often obscured by smog that includes particles emitted by Midwestern power plants. "There is no state that is clearly out of this program," said John Kinsman, director of air quality programs for the institute.

The Tennessee Valley Authority faces one of the biggest clean-up tasks. One of the smoggiest parks is the Great Smokies, the most-visited national park and one with such bad air quality that it has issued more than 100 alerts of unhealthy air in the last three years.

On a bad day, visibility there is only about 15 miles. On the park's best days, such as after a big storm has temporarily blown the pollution out, visibility can be as far as 55 miles.

The National Environmental Trust recently commissioned a Republican polling firm, American Viewpoint, to conduct a survey of attitudes in three states, including Tennessee, toward clean air in the parks.

The results, which were shared with the administration, showed overwhelming support for cleaning air in the parks, even if it meant higher utility bills.

The importance of the parks to the public and politicians was reflected in a recent letter from Senator Fred Thompson, Republican of Tennessee, to President Bush encouraging the administration to support the agency's clean-up

rules.

"While I do not want T.V.A. to be competitively disadvantaged, I am very concerned about what is happening to the park," Senator Thompson wrote. Describing the threat of foul air to the Smokies, he added, "Most shocking to me is that, according to park officials, air quality in the Smokies is so poor during the summer months that hiking on back-country trails is more hazardous to your health than walking along the streets of Manhattan."